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## Re-Thinking Unemployment: A Challenge to the Legacy of Jahoda et al.

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### **ABSTRACT**

The research of Jahoda et al. in the Austrian town of Marienthal in the 1930s had a formative influence over the future of unemployment research in the social sciences. This article contends that that research was predicated on a tacit set of beliefs about a gendered relationship between 'human nature' and 'work'. One consequence of this was that a moral discourse of human nature as fundamentally a working or labouring nature firmly anchored the trajectory of subsequent research into unemployment. This article presents a detailed critique of the moral discourse of human nature that underpins the Marienthal study and its theoretical elaboration into staged theories of psychological response to unemployment, and in so doing argues the necessity for freeing the sociological imagination from the types of belief reproduced by Jahoda et al. as to what human beings, and therefore human societies, are for.

### **KEY WORDS**

labour / Marienthal / moral discourse / unemployment / work

## **Introduction**

The research of Jahoda et al. (1972) in the small Austrian town of Marienthal in 1930, has been foundational in social scientific understandings of unemployment. Fleck argues that the research 'findings have become common knowledge for social scientists' (2002: x), and that it has served as a 'blueprint for successors studies' since its translation into English in 1972. Hitzler (2005) describes the work as 'one of the most legendary "qualitative" studies' in the social sciences, while Burnett argues that Jahoda et al.'s interpretations

approached 'the point of being received wisdom' on the meaning and experience of unemployment in the social sciences (Burnett, 1994: 228). In its incarnation as a television docudrama in Germany, the research has become archetypal of the depression era experience of unemployment, feeding back into academia in its use as a pedagogical tool in German and Austrian universities (Fleck, 2002: vii).

Marienthal was a prime site for the study of unemployment in 1930. The town had depended almost entirely on one factory, to the extent that its closure was followed by almost total unemployment in the town (Jahoda et al., 1972: 3, 20). The Marienthal study<sup>1</sup> stands as a landmark piece of research by going beyond describing the conditions of the town's inhabitants and developing social-psychological theories of response to unemployment that were premised on a theory of human nature. Unemployment for the Marienthal researchers meant a state of deficit in relation to a set of 'enduring human needs' that are provided by paid work (Jahoda, 1982: 60). Unemployment takes away:

- shared experience
- a structured experience of time
- collective purpose
- status and identity
- required regular activity

Unemployment, then, is not interpreted by Jahoda et al. in terms of poverty, because poverty is a cross-category-cutting experience that has no necessary or exclusive relation to unemployment. The problem with unemployment is not the lack of resources as such, but the deprivation of the legitimate means by which resources are secured by employed people – i.e. paid work – and the demoralizing effect this has on people 'in terms of a series of lacunae associated with a state of non-working' (Walters, 2000: 85). Jahoda herself, the most well-known author of the text, though not among its principal researchers, established a career in social psychology, but the Marienthal study itself made use of a plethora of research methods that crossed the disciplinary boundaries between psychology and sociology (Fleck, 2002: 15). Its influence has similarly traversed that boundary and can be traced in both psychological accounts of responses to unemployment and in qualitative sociological research on the experience of unemployment. Jahoda herself returned to the issue in numerous publications following the translation of the Marienthal study into English in 1972 (see for instance, Jahoda, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1988, 1992), and is noted as the premier 'deprivation' theorist of unemployment within psychology (Marsh, 1989: 361). Hayes and Nutman (1981) updated the original interpretive model of the Marienthal study, proposing seven 'functions of work' that built on the five 'human needs' of the original, in light of subsequent social-psychological research. Waters and Moore (2002) provide a host of references to psychological research from the last 25 years or so that directly investigate one or more of the five 'human needs' identified by Jahoda et al., and go on to report on their own investigation into attempts to ameliorate the 'deprivation'

of unemployment (2002: 15). Sociological accounts have either explicitly acknowledged the influence of Jahoda et al. (for instance Fryer and McKenna, 1987: 49; Wallace, 1987: 71) or have done so implicitly through investigating one or more of the five 'human needs' (for instance Bostyn and Wight, 1987; Coffield et al., 1986; Furlong, 1992). More generally, the central assumptions of the Marienthal study, as indicated in the introductory comments, have become sedimented into sociological research on unemployment, whether or not the seminal influence of the study is formally cited or acknowledged.

Despite diverse methodologies and styles, then, what unites both disciplinary trajectories is the central theme of the Marienthal study – a belief that paid work is in some way central to human, especially adult male, experience, and that its lack in the form of unemployment is necessarily and intrinsically problematic. In other words, it is not the instrumental benefits of paid work – provision of the means of subsistence – that are the central issue, but its 'human costs'. The critical contention of this article is that the influence of the Marienthal study, its status as social scientific common-sense, makes it overdue for a critical re-appraisal. As Fleck argues (2002: x–xi), the study was the first to argue that there were human costs of unemployment, and was greeted with surprise at the time of its publication. The strangeness of that surprised reaction today is indicative of the extent to which its message has seeped into everyday understandings of what unemployment means. However, the validity of the original research is undermined by its dependence on a normative assumption of the supra-economic importance of paid work. The Marienthal research findings on the sufferings of the town's inhabitants are taken as evidence that the mirror of unemployment – paid work – is the remedy for those sufferings. This claim is made without being backed up by concomitant research on the *benefits* of engaging in paid work that would be necessary to give them validity. This absence of research into the experience of paid work suggests that paid work is already taken for granted by the researchers as the normal, default condition of adult male life, and the absence of paid work from an adult male life *must* therefore be problematic. The restoration of paid work therefore becomes a normative agenda that gives the book its emotional appeal, and remains its telos. What is not given due consideration in the Marienthal study is the idea that the sufferings consequent on the loss of paid work might be social constructs, that is, outcomes of an historically-contingent construction of (male) identities in relation to a particular form of paid work. Without that consideration, it is not possible to imagine any other solution to these sufferings than that same form of paid work, or to imagine ways to reconstruct identities in ways that might not have tied the identities of Marienthal's inhabitants to the impersonal and fragile world of the depression era economy.

This article proceeds with a description of each of the five human 'needs' discovered by Jahoda et al. before turning to a discussion of the theory of human nature that is implicit within them. The analysis is then concluded with some reflections on the continuing limits on our thinking imposed by adherence to a moral discourse of work.

## Work as Shared Experience

The idea that work is crucial in providing shared experience is ironic in the Marienthal case, in that being unemployed was a ubiquitous experience at the time of the research. More important than this for Jahoda et al. was the lack of shared experience for men in the local factory, not a common experience of isolated misery. Unemployed experience in Marienthal, in contrast to time spent in the factory, was atomized and privatized, so that unemployment was cited as destructive for not only the individual but also, and more importantly, the community (Jahoda et al., 1972: 2).

There are two principal aspects to the theme of unemployment as community damage. Firstly, and especially in the Marienthal case, there is a concern for the local community constituted by the unemployed themselves: 'now the whole place is dead' (Jahoda et al., 1972: 37). There is a strong sense here that unemployment is something catastrophic that can befall an entire community, like a visitation of plague. Marienthal is described by the researchers as a 'weary' community (p. 36), in spite of the finding that the health of many of the workers had *improved* since the closure of the factory (Jahoda et al., 1972: 34). The effects on the community are extrapolated beyond the absence of shared experience of work itself. Jahoda et al. pointed to a general decline in participation in civic life (1972: 38) and a decline in cultural and political participation (p. 39) and implied a causal link with unemployment (p. 41). The second aspect concerns not the unemployed as such, but the rest of us. Unemployment is presented like a fairy-tale warning of what might befall us; 'the entire community has resigned itself to decline' (Jahoda et al., 1972: 59) – a powerful tale precisely because of the reified nature of unemployment as something *unavoidable* that happens to us by virtue of bureaucratic assignment of category membership.

This in turn has two effects. Firstly, unemployment inspires fear of Marienthal-style disintegration. Jahoda et al. concluded that four types of response to *unemployment*, not to extreme *poverty*, were common in Marienthal, the most spectacular of which were manifested by 'broken' families who had 'given up' both in terms of maintaining appearances and/or through descent into an apathetic mental outlook (1972: 53). They also report children's essays on unemployment (which they commissioned as a research tool) which expressed 'satisfaction at not belonging to the unemployed and outcast group, and partly a fear of one day having to share the same fate' (p. 60). The researchers also describe 'irrational spending' as 'probably the first signs of disintegration' (pp. 54–5). The force of this study in respect of the fearfulness it may generate comes from the postulation of regular, patterned responses to unemployment. This implied inevitability invokes the feeling that 'it could happen to you', and opens our naked dependence on the impersonal economic cycle of capitalism. Jahoda et al. make this very point when they state that 'a feeling of *irrevocability and hopelessness* had a much more paralysing effect than economic deprivation itself' (1972: 79, emphasis added), without considering the possibility that the latter may have caused the former.

Secondly, the dire consequences of unemployment feed into a construction of the unemployed as objects of fear themselves – that is to say, they are ‘othered’ and differentiated from ‘us’. People to whom bad things happen become bad, subject to ontological relegation. Jahoda et al. make this clear when they suggest atavistic tendencies among the unemployed: ‘it is as if the cultural values invested in the political struggle had been ossified, or given away ... to more *primitive* forms of conflict’ (1972: 42, emphasis added); ‘a rise in more *primitive* hostilities motivated by personal malice’ (p. 73, emphasis added). This use of language inaugurates a hierarchical association of animalistic naturalism with the unemployed, as compared to the cultured humanity of workers. Irrationality (unsustainable consumption), together with invocations of primitivism, coalesce into an image of unemployment as something to be feared by virtue of the damage that it does to the (assumed) meaning of ‘human being’ – i.e. as a cultured and rational subject. The unemployed are therefore to be feared both as something we might become, and also as objects of loathing in themselves; ‘the greatest evil of unemployment ... [is] the hatred and fear which it breeds’ (Beveridge, cited in Allen and Waton, 1986: 14).

## Work as Time Structure

The second human need that Jahoda et al. argued to be provided by work was a structured experience of time (1972: 66). As with the specificity of shared experience, the type of time structure is not contextualized in the book. The rupture represented by the end of structured paid work-time is damaging only because of a previous rupture that paid work-time brought to an experience of time that was embedded in rhythms of nature; sunrise and sunset, the changing seasons, the tailoring of time-use to the contingencies of weather, and so on. It is easy to map a hierarchy of cultured enlightenment in the factory versus naive pastoral innocence – a hierarchical distinction between ‘work’, construed as the production of artefacts that are external to the life process, and ‘labour’, construed as the reproduction of life itself. This is also mirrored in the distinction between *male* factory work and *female* domestic labour (see Arendt, 1998: 79–174).<sup>2</sup> In fact, Jahoda et al. describe the inhabitants of Marienthal as living through ‘a more *primitive*, less differentiated experience of time’ (1972: 77, emphasis added). In other words, the ordering of time is assumed to be superior, more advanced, evidence of progress against dependence on nature. An irony here is that the augmented humanity bought with the mastery of work-time is at the price of a fragile dependence on technology and the industrial economy. A double blow was dealt to the unemployed of Marienthal then: not only did the loss of paid work remove their capacity to structure their own time; it revealed the prior loss that factory work had masked – the capacity to structure the experience, and more pertinently the use, of time in relation to nature. Jahoda et al. state that ‘the chief impression is one of blunting monotony’ (1972: 36). But the authors do provide contrasting evidence about how working in the factory was *not* monotonous while in operation; we

cannot assume that it was, but we are given no evidence that it was not. Jahoda et al. lament how 'leisure proves to be a tragic gift' (1972: 66) and how 'idleness rules the day' (p. 73). They tell us about the markedly slow walking pace and frequent stopping in their tracks of men on the streets (p. 67). There is a point to be made about the validity of the assumed causality of unemployment here. Jahoda et al. provide detailed evidence of impoverished diets (1972: 29–30), so that it might be more reasonable to argue that the lassitude of Marienthal's inhabitants is due to malnutrition rather than the loss of 'material and moral incentives to make use of their time' (p. 66).

This last quote represents an eruption of the moral discursive underpinnings of the research, because it is a clear instance of a straightforward equation of paid work with moral purpose – without work there is no other moral code towards which to orient a day-to-day ethic of living. But a moral purpose for whom? There is a clearly gendered experience of time: women 'have considerably less time on their hands' (1972: 67), because they are involved in domestic labour and childcare (pp. 74–5). This 'finding' proved persistent over the years. As Allen and Waton (1986: 2) pointed out, sociology traditionally problematized the unemployment only of adult men. Indeed, almost unremarked upon by the researchers is the finding that women's skills as domestic labourers were called upon to an ever greater extent as the material impacts of unemployment took their toll; 'to manage an income which averages just one-quarter of the normal wages requires careful planning and sophisticated calculation' (Jahoda et al. 1972: 31). Although the point is not made, the implication is that managing unemployment is a skilled occupation, and furthermore that it was women who were managing the unemployment of men, and thereby drawing on and enhancing their domestic skills, not just in terms of budgeting but also in terms of 'make-do and mend' and other household skills. Hurstfield points out that 1930s unemployment research routinely marginalized women's experience through the exclusive focus on its impact on men (Hurstfield, 1986: 30). Again, history has had a tendency to repeat: 'Managing unemployment is very much women's work' (Allen and Waton, 1986: 12). Cragg and Dawson provide this apposite quote from a respondent: 'When a woman's unemployed she can do housework ... if a man's got no hobbies, he's worse off' (cited in Hurstfield, 1986: 43). Jahoda et al. go on to relate the tendency among the poorest families to itemize and label all of their possessions, which they interpret as nostalgia for autonomy and power (1972: 88). It might equally be seen as a rational response to a situation in which previously insignificant items acquire new importance, including their worth for pawn or sale, and must be carefully accounted for – unemployment is not just hard – it is hard *work*. We are not told of the increased demands for emotional labour from Marienthal's married women.

### **Work as Collective Purpose**

In relation to the provision of collective purpose, Jahoda et al. were concerned with the factory as a social hub (1972: 37), and as such as a stimulus to 'cultural

pursuits' and a ward against apathy (1972: 38). Relating to the earlier point on the skilled task of dealing with impoverishment, it can be argued that the work of managing unemployment was a collective purpose that could have been shared – at the very least within families as micro-collectives – if not for the strictly gendered division of labour – i.e. unemployment as such does not necessarily preclude collective purpose, but only that particular form which was previously provided in the factory. Returning to the gendered dimension of unemployment, Brah writes that street culture has constituted a sustaining resource for men, but has historically been denied to women through their domestic responsibilities (Brah, 1986: 69). There is a double price here too. The association of unemployed men on street corners is dismissed by Jahoda et al. as aimless (1972: 71). What role it may itself play in constituting a collective purpose – sociality as a means of dealing with the undeniably grim experience of unemployment – is obliterated by a discourse that can see collective purpose only through paid work. Unemployed men are thus rendered more visible and subject to stigma as unemployed men under the research gaze, but to claim that they are doing 'nothing' is a consequence of the values brought to the research by the researchers. Furthermore, the 'fact' that women have recourse to domestic labour – a privatized and isolating experience as Oakley (1976) famously documented – implies that they have less need of collective purpose than men do. Is this because we are in a moral universe in which women are viewed as less significant, as less fully human, or is it because men are inherently more fragile and in greater need of socializing? Either option is unappealing, but one or both must have some purchase on the framing of this kind of research.

It is from the tacit socialist view of work as a unifying collective enterprise that the atomization of unemployment can be seen as so damaging as to be an attack on a fundamental human need. As Arendt pointed out, modernity was in part built on the glorification of labour as such, so that '[w]hat we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is without the only activity left to them' (Arendt, 1998: 5). At first sight this is at odds with more contemporary emphasis on work as a route to *independence* of purpose, especially through practices of consumption and consequent symbolic self-construction (Dean, 1996: 213; Du Gay, 1996: 77). But Arendt asserts that consumption is the necessary concomitant of production, and as intrinsic to the process of labour as the reproduction of life itself (1998: 131). The problem that Arendt sees is that consumption in a society of labourers inheres in 'private activities displayed in the open' (1998: 134). Consumption is not in a meaningful sense a 'collective purpose', but it remains as intrinsic to life itself as does labour. If people did not 'need' a collective purpose, then the buried Marxist foundations of the research would be corroded, so it is therefore not surprising that the 'need' for a private, individual purpose (such as consumption) is absent from the Marienthal study. To elaborate, Jahoda et al.'s evidence for the loss of collective purpose comes chiefly from the decline in political interest. For instance, they cite decreasing subscription rates to a 'political' newspaper in concert with rising sales of an 'entertainment' newspaper (Jahoda et al., 1972: 39). The moral preference for politics rather than entertainment as inherently



more of a 'collective' activity is suggestive of a tacit moral preference for labour over consumption in light of Arendt's insights. This is reinforced by the tone of disdain for instances of individualistic behaviour, manifested in statements like, 'as privation increases, organization membership becomes less a matter of conviction and more a matter of financial interest' (Jahoda et al., 1972: 42), or in reports of petty maliciousness such as unfounded denunciations of casual workers who claimed unemployment relief (p. 43).

As a counter-point to the preoccupation with the individualization of the unemployed of Jahoda et al., McKee and Bell argue that there has been a marked tendency within sociology to personalize unemployment through relating individual anecdotes of suffering (1986: 135). The decline of the ambition for working-class collectivity into a Marxist memory was taken further by Seaton's argument that the 1930s have received a retrospective and nostalgic gloss as the era of a 'red united fighting front' (Seaton, 1986: 18). Jahoda et al.'s words show us that even in the 1930s the fear of unemployment was in large part due to its potential to fracture the political resolve of the proletariat – that is, its de-collectivizing risk. It is ironic, then, that social research itself, through its concern with relating accounts of individual suffering, played some small historical part in this process of individualization, especially in the 1980s. McKee and Bell's statement is instructive: 'Their potential for collective action remains a fantasy in the minds of those who know what's good for the unemployed – without knowing the unemployed' (1986: 149). The disparagement of consumption ('irrational spending') is exemplary of this tendency in the Marienthal study.

## Work as Status and Identity

Jahoda et al. argue that having lost employment, 'people gradually lose contact with their tradition of vocation and work; in their place they have acquired a new vocation – being unemployed' (1972: 82). Once more, it is the status and identity of men that is at issue. A valued status and identity is something that men create and reproduce, through work (while women create and reproduce a subsidiary identity through labour). Jahoda et al. are here clearly setting out the view that identity is constructed through human (in this case male) activity as something one *does* rather than *is*. This discussion is foregrounding the idea of a *moral* discourse of work: it is moral precisely because the social sciences are here arguing that men must *become* what they are – workers. There is no moral imperative in a discourse of nuclear physics in this sense, no exhortation for the atom to become atomic; 'Quarks are not aware', as Hacking put it (2004: 11). The point is that the knowledge of men as workers in a state of becoming introduces a gap – a space for the operation of relations of power or ethics, an arena in which things might be otherwise, but the telos is always work. The danger here then is that when unemployment is construed as 'doing nothing', to be unemployed logically holds identity, any identity, in abeyance. This is one reason for holding on to a pre-unemployed identity. 'I am an unemployed X',

although a declaration of having a spoiled identity, at least maintains a discursive articulation with work as a route to a social existence. Nowhere is the unshakeable faith in the equation of work with the purpose of human life clearer than here, where to be unemployed is to be compromised as a human being – to be identity-less. The centrality of working identity to a version of masculinity persists in social research. Lamont's working-class respondents are characterized by a belief that it is 'largely through work and responsibility that they assert control over uncertainty' (2000: 23). That uncertainty is not just economic, but also in relation to maintaining a grip on who one is: 'being hardworking is a mode of expressing manliness' (Lamont, 2000: 26).

The theme of injured identity consequent to unemployment gave expression to what would become a ubiquitous strategy of articulating the unemployed to 'the rest of us' through reports of a shared commitment to the work ethic. Walters (2000: 83) writes that this style of social research was concerned with foregrounding the unemployed subject, rather than unemployment as a statistical and depersonalized object. Two examples are Bakke's *The Unemployed Man* (1933) and Caradog Jones' *Social Survey of Merseyside* (1934), both of which challenged the 'work-shy' stereotype of the unemployed, but again masked the experience of women (Hurstfield, 1986: 42), who were assumed to have non-paid work-based sources of identity and status. Jahoda herself replicated this strategy in 1982, when she argued that evidence suggested a strong desire to work among the unemployed and a general resilience of the work ethic (Jahoda, 1982: 36–7). The implication here is of identity-nostalgia among the unemployed, especially unemployed men, a familiar cultural theme from *Boys From the Blackstuff* to *The Full Monty*. But if we accept the premise that gendered identities are social constructs, then the ailing identities of men are contingent on their particularly intensive and historically-local relationship to the industrial capitalist labour market. A pivotal problem is the dominance of male identity over female identity. The housewife, insulated from the psychological ravages of unemployment to some extent, still had an identity subservient to that of her husband – unemployment of the husband entailed stigma for the whole family, revealed by the children's essays that cited unemployment as a *family* catastrophe that tainted all of its members (Jahoda et al., 1972: 60). In a sense, wife and child have no further to fall, as their identities are always already marked as inferior. As Du Gay puts it, "man" only constructs its identity through excluding that which it is not and establishing a violent hierarchy between itself and its "other" – "woman" (1996: 48).

Jahoda et al., therefore, tap into the intrinsic place of paid work in the identity of 'man', so that the unemployed man is similarly on the wrong end of a 'violent hierarchy' of identity. As his wife and children manage a proxy promotion in the identity hierarchy through their association with a working man, his unemployment impacts on them with force; 'the entire family's style of living is an extension of the man's identity' (Bostyn and Wight, 1987: 142). This tells us a lot about the theory of human nature that underpins Jahoda et al.'s research, in that it shows us that it is the nature of adult men that is being problematized. Mass

unemployment in the 1930s stimulated a crisis in knowledge about what adult men are, but did not do the same thing for women. As we have already seen, women's domestic skills were accentuated in Marienthal, but there was no consequent elevation of their social standing because they were just fulfilling their natural destinies in any case; and because it was 'natural', it must surely take no cultivation of skill. The fate of the unemployed man, by contrast, is unnatural and he is dislocated, most obviously through his stigmatic occupation of 'the streets' instead of his place of work. The cover of the most recent edition of the Marienthal study (Jahoda et al., 2002) carries a photograph of a group of men apparently idly watching a river, the antithesis of industrious masculinity.

### Work as Required Regular Activity

The final human need, for 'required regular activity' (Jahoda et al., 1972: 2) sounds like a contemporary health and fitness admonishment, but is more concerned with the preoccupation with human life as labour, being conducted in resistance to the sins of passivity, stillness and quietude. There is a strong historical resonance here between productivity and *reproductivity*. As Acton points out, the idea of virility was crucial in the formation of bourgeois male identity (cited in Weeks, 1996: 39). Aries (1985: 37) records the prominence given in the Judeo-Christian world to instrumental, procreative sexual activity (an act of impregnation carried out by men) by St. Paul, and the concomitant denigration of all other sexual practices as passive and dissolute. Aries writes that, 'men are the real sinners, since both power and responsibility are theirs' (1985: 37). The situation with regards unemployment is analogous. Men are both the rightful agents of procreation and of material production through labour, and this is why the unemployment of women was far less problematic. The lethargy of Marienthal's men (Jahoda et al. write of the 'paralysing effects of unemployment' and the 'decline into apathy' [1972: 2, 39]) is reminiscent of a post-orgasmic dissolution and quiescence, minus the pleasure. Theirs is not a righteous period of rest following the joy of a day's labour, but a shameful indolence subject to stigma and opprobrium; 'idleness rules the day' and 'they have forgotten how to hurry' (1972: 73, 66). Jahoda et al. express mock surprise when they write 'spending a long time in bed ... is apparently felt to be in some way shameful' (p. 74). There's nothing 'apparent' about it. It is obvious because that shame derives from the moral discourse that is both being described and reproduced by Jahoda et al.

In his sketch of the historical character of the work ethic, Bauman points to the belief that 'it is undignified to rest' (1998: 5), and further claims that 'the work ethic was ... about the surrender of freedom' (p. 7). 'Required regular activity' provides evidence for Bauman's characterization within the Marienthal study. Required by whom and of whom? This is a curious statement from a socialist perspective, in that it is tantamount to celebrating capitalists for the favour they are doing by providing employment and requiring regular activity from their working-class male employees. In a sense this is a pragmatic truth though, given

that what we are dealing with here is a group of men who have been *constituted* through their long experience and habituation to work. In the context of early 20th century working-class slums in Britain, Roberts wrote that,

‘... many were genuinely grateful to an employer for being kind enough to use their services at all. Voting Conservative, they felt at one with him. It was their belief, widely expressed at election times, that the middle and upper classes with their better intelligence and education had a natural right to think and act on behalf of the rest’ (1986: 167).

As Du Gay argues, the revelation that a particular identity is contingent and discursive does not entail its destruction (1996: 49). Jahoda et al., in their focus on *required* regular activity, clearly believed that people needed leading, and as such re-constituted a particular worker identity, instead of revealing its contingency and therefore its potential malleability. Jahoda herself was in favour of a welfare-to-work style intervention at the time, ‘Only the provision of any work could counter the resignation that comes with unemployment’ (cited in Fleck, 2002: xii).

## Discussion

The purported five human needs that are provided by work on closer analysis are revealed as contingent social constructs cut through with gendered and class-based assumptions. The central problem of this theorization of human nature, on the basis of empirical research into a temporally and locally specific event, is that unemployment is reified as a category of experience, and the unemployed as types of person to whom certain predictable things will and do happen. Assumptions about the damage done by the experience of unemployment subsequently authorize the sympathetic interventions of researchers – Jahoda et al. went so far as to organize community activities for Marienthal’s inhabitants (1972: 9) – in order to redress the deprivation inaugurated by unemployment. The interventions of the researchers reinforce a lack of agency that is already imputed to ‘the unemployed’ by the tales of psychological breakdown. Marienthal is thereby transmuted into a myth that keeps ‘us’ afraid of unemployment and inhibits our capacity to re-think our response to it, or even to have a response that is ‘our own’ and not simply a psychological reflex. As Passerini puts it:

[M]yth steals meanings from language, transforms them into form, and through form changes historical time into nature, contingent into eternal. The result is a false nature that has lost its memory: it does not want to be reminded of the labour of its creation. (1993: 50)

The normative and myth-making element of the Marienthal study remains more or less implicit, because the researchers operated from the (unstated in the text) assumption that their task was to ‘improve’ the lives of the town’s inhabitants. Fleck argues that they were engaged in an early version of ‘action research’, by which he means that they were attempting to ‘generate the kind of social movement that they feel the community lacks’ (2002: xiv) through intervening in its social life.

As such, the Marienthal researchers might be said to have reproduced the same mistake of Marxism that Arendt points to in *The Human Condition* (1998), that social and political life is something that can be made or fabricated out of collective human action: 'To conceive of politics as making is to ignore human plurality in theory and to coerce individuals in practice' (Canovan, 1998: xii). The route to emancipation for Marx was through productive labour, but the danger of this view was to conflate the constitution of human nature with the experience of labour itself (Arendt, 1998: 86) – a danger replicated by the Marienthal study and all others that have ploughed the same furrow of some or other fundamental 'need' that 'work' provides. Rodgers argues that any 'appeal to the moral centrality of work ... turned necessity into pride and servitude into honor' (cited in Lamont, 2000: 23–24). The fears of societal breakdown consequent to the loss of the organizing and humanizing force of labour re-emerged in the 1980s, with well-publicized urban riots fuelling fears of social disorder resulting from unemployment (Hutson and Jenkins, 1989: 3). This situation was exacerbated by more or less overt racism, combined with a more tacit ageism; 'the unemployed' as an uncultured, amorphous and threatening mass resonates with these discourses. Common to all is a tendency towards dehumanizing massification; an imputed atavistic deindividuation that stands in opposition to the cultured distinctions of whites or adults or workers, respectively. In her return to the issue in 1982, Jahoda wrote that 'it is easier to generalise about the experience of unemployment than of employment with its larger variability' (1982: 4). Hendry points out that fear of the mob remained a persistent feature of discourse on youth unemployment (1987: 215). Lamont describes the coincidence of white working-class pride in a hard-working self-sufficiency with racist stereotypes of laziness, the lack of a work ethic and welfare dependency as a way to draw a moral boundary with a black working class in the USA (2000: 60–3). The boundaries between the disciplined worker and the amorphous unemployed mass remain salient.

But, recalling Arendt's discussion of the society of labourers inaugurated by modernity, there is a paradoxical celebration of massification in the form of collective purpose among the unemployed in the Marienthal study. Jahoda's own overview of the story of unemployment research since Marienthal states that 'work is ... the very essence of being alive' (1982: 8). Arendt, however, asserts that it is labour itself, not human nature, that 'requires for best results a rhythmically ordered performance' and a 'rhythmic co-ordination of all individual movements' (1998: 145). In other words, it is the prior constitution of the men of Marienthal as labourers that caused the response to unemployment, not their essential nature. Being unemployed does not strip an individual of (human) identity, it merely substitutes one identity for another, albeit one that is more visible for the fact of its being deviant from the norm of a paid working identity. Rose advances a 'genealogy of subjectification' in which particular knowledges of 'what it is to be human' are understood as 'the site of a historical problem, not ... the basis of a historical narrative' (1998: 23). Foucault argues that these historically-localized problems are manifested through the augmented visibility of exemplary types of persons; 'In a system of discipline, the child is more individualised than the adult, the patient

more than the healthy man, the madmen and the delinquent more than the normal and the non-delinquent' (1991: 193). We can add the unemployed and the working man to this binary system. The disparagement of 'the unemployed' and the concomitant elevation of working identities persists, as Lamont's respondents suggested in their despising of 'lazy parasites' drawing on welfare support, alongside their admiration for people holding more than one job (Lamont, 2000: 24). Jahoda et al. were similarly wedded to the idea of work as the primary locus of identity, with the unfortunate consequence that familial or friendship-based identities were down-played. In fact, they argued that, despite their resilience, personal relations too ultimately crumpled in the face of unemployment (Jahoda et al., 1972: 85–6). The result was that the miserable, broken figures of the Marienthal study were moved closer to constituting the central and exclusive truth of the whole existence of the unemployed. This 'knowledge', generated through the skewed concerns of social research, obliterates the complex and multiple experiences of particular human subjects. Most damagingly, it places the necessity of labour at the centre of human experience. This necessity, to reiterate, is not, or not just, an economic and material one. It is the very ontological status of men that is at stake if their 'needs' to labour are taken away.

## Conclusion

The acceptance of Jahoda et al.'s version of the truth of being unemployed, or at least some variation of it, entailed the partial forgetting of the moral-discursive underpinnings of that research, but remembering is important. Jahoda et al. reproduced a moral discourse of work that suppressed the material importance of poverty in deference to a theory of psychological response; that misread the activity of surviving unemployment as 'doing nothing'; that gendered the meaning of work, and therefore the meaning of being a woman or a man; that eulogized work as such and thereby marginalized non-work experiences. Research both inhabits and reproduces the same moral rules of discursive formation that it applies to the study of unemployment. The moral framing of unemployment has therefore substantially eluded social scientific analysis because it is committed to the same moral framework. For example, Wilson's recent argument against 'end of work' theorists such as Gorz, Habermas, Offe, Rifkin or Touraine, is legitimated by BSA (British Social Attitudes) survey data, on the basis of which he asserts that 'most workers value their jobs, and do not just see employment as a source of income. I expect that this will continue to be the case' (Wilson, 2004: 168). But Wilson's arguments begin from a normative position as regards paid work, in that the end of work theorists are described as 'depend[ing] on a *pessimistic* scenario of permanent joblessness' (Wilson, 2004: 4, emphasis added). The erroneous imputation of pessimism reveals a commitment to paid work that misses the emancipatory thrust of end of work theorists. Gorz, for instance, adamantly celebrates the potential available for a reduction in the amount of time spent in 'the specific "work" peculiar to industrial capitalism' (1999: 2; see also Shershow, 2005: 59). He does not advocate the abolition of the

means by which, in Arendt's terms, human beings fabricate their world, or experience themselves as *animal laborans* (Arendt, 1998: 144). In this light, Wilson's evidence that more than two-thirds of BSA survey respondents would 'prefer work' is less convincing. The survey question asks respondents '... would you still prefer to have a job, or wouldn't you bother?' given the lack of financial necessity for paid work (Wilson, 2004: 111). The 'wouldn't you bother' phrase implies that the only alternative to having a job is doing nothing, not bothering, being idle, unoccupied. Wilson, then, is representative of the reiterative trend in the social sciences in relation to the position of Jahoda et al., which can be sketched as follows: 'people' ought to 'work', because, firstly, they suffer (not economically, but in terms of identity, status and so on) if they are denied the opportunity to do so, and secondly, they say that they want to. This is a decidedly thin justification for clinging to a full employment utopia. To illustrate by analogy, the social science finding that a patriarchal society creates forms of masculinity that 'need' to dominate, exploit or abuse women, and the knowledge that some men would suffer some form of 'deprivation' if their opportunities to do so were taken away, justifies neither a theory of (male) human nature as dominant, exploitative or violent, any more than it does social policies that aim to retrench that form of masculinity. Similarly, the knowledge that work is central to the experiences and identities of so many of us is not sufficient reason to celebrate it.

Lamont argues that colonialism constructed the relationship between whites and non-whites in terms of reason controlling nature, and 'natural indolence in particular' (2000: 173–4), while earlier in this article I defended the unemployed of Marienthal from Jahoda et al.'s interpretation of their activity as 'doing nothing'. As Shershow (2005: 4, 228) argues, from Marx onwards we are haunted by the cultural denigration of indolence, the feeling that we must cling to some notion of the centrality of work, to defend ourselves from the charge of 'doing nothing'. The indecency of that charge can be traced in part to the revulsion of unemployment, and the source of that revulsion can be traced in part to the Marienthal study. Fevre asserts that '[i]n order to begin to ask what our chances of changing things for the better might be, we need to make sure that we understand exactly how things got the way they are' (2000: 117). Without more awareness of its own moral foundations, the social sciences are poorly-adapted to this task. With that awareness, they are more able to play a part in pointing towards a future in which identity and self-worth are not dependent on a moral discourse of work.

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## Notes

- 1 This article, while critical of the moral discourse underpinning the research, in no way seeks to impugn the intentions of the researchers, their empathy for the population of Marienthal, or their hope for a better future for them.
- 2 While Arendt's insights on the distinction between 'labour' (comprising production and consumption) as the reproduction of human life and 'work' as the fabrication of the world of human artifice (1998: 79–174), inform this article, it does not use the terms 'labour' and 'work' in Arendt's senses throughout. The initial cue has been taken from the uses of the terms in the Marienthal study itself, and they have been nuanced where apposite in the analysis.

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